



## Suriname

### Country Reports on Human Rights Practices - [2000](#)

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After over a decade of predominantly military rule, Suriname installed a freely elected Parliament and inaugurated a democratically chosen president in 1991. After free and fair elections in May, the new 51-member National Assembly elected Ronald Venetiaan of the National Party of Suriname (NPS) as President in August with the necessary two-thirds majority required by the Constitution; he replaced Jules Wijdenbosch of the National Democratic Party (NDP). Venetiaan had previously served as President in 1991-96. The Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, and previous disputes over appointees by the former president were alleviated when the appointees in question resigned from the judiciary; by year's end, the judiciary appeared to be acting independently.

The armed forces are responsible for national security and border and immigration control; they are under the control of the civilian Minister of Defense. Civilian police bear primary responsibility for the maintenance of law and order; they report to the Ministry of Justice and Police. The first Venetiaan Government had reformed the military in 1995-96 by purging military officers and supporters of former dictator Desi Bouterse, who ruled the country in the 1980's. Although in the May elections Bouterse's party won 10 seats in the National Assembly, 1 of which he occupies, the party's influence within the military has declined steadily. Members of the security forces continue to commit some human rights abuses.

The economy depends heavily on the export of bauxite derivatives. Unregulated gold mining is an increasingly important economic activity that highlights a lack of land rights for indigenous and tribal people, and it has a serious environmental impact. The Government and state-owned companies employ over half the working population. Overall economic conditions deteriorated during the year, and estimated gross domestic product declined by approximately 4 percent. The inflation rate was 82 percent, compared with 113 percent in 1999. Per capita annual income was about \$1,000.

The Government generally respected the human rights of its citizens; however, serious problems still remain in some areas. Police mistreat detainees, particularly during arrests; guards abuse prisoners; and local detention facilities remain overcrowded. The judiciary suffers from ineffectiveness and a huge case backlog. There was some harassment and media self-censorship, and societal discrimination against women and indigenous and tribal people persists. Violence against women and trafficking in women and girls are problems.

#### RESPECT FOR HUMAN RIGHTS

##### Section 1 Respect for the Integrity of the Person, Including Freedom From:

###### a. Political and Other Extrajudicial Killing

There were no reports of political or other extrajudicial killings.

While there have been no recent reports of political killings, the Government has not addressed past abuses, and they continue to be a focus of concern. The authorities have not taken action against prison guards who allegedly beat a prisoner to death in 1993. Late in the year, the Government began an investigation into the December 1982 executions by the Bouterse regime of 15 opposition leaders; there has yet to be an investigation into the 1986 massacre of civilians at the village of Moiwana.

In December 1997, the Wijdenbosch administration appointed a "committee to establish the framework for a

commission to investigate past human rights abuses." Human rights groups, which had been pressing since 1995 for an independent human rights commission to investigate violations committed during the 1980's, neither were informed nor consulted prior to the establishment of the committee. Moreover, the chairman of the committee was reportedly a member of Bouterse's team of legal advisers; his appointment raised questions regarding the objectivity of the group's work. Although the committee's report was presented to the former President in September 1999, the Government did not release its contents or recommendations. In view of the human rights record of the Bouterse regime, many of whose members participated in the Wijdenbosch Government, human rights organizations remained concerned about the potential for a deterioration of civil liberties.

After the elections, there were calls for the new Government to investigate the December 1982 murders before the 18-year statute of limitations expired in December. In October the Court of Justice began hearings on the murders in response to a request from relatives of the victims. Bouterse's lawyer sought to postpone the hearings, but the court denied his request. The court heard testimony from the victims' relatives, human rights activists, and the prosecutor's office, which had not yet made any investigation into the killings. Previously, Bouterse himself had requested an investigation, after the victims' relatives asked a Dutch court to prosecute him in that country. Following an order from the Court of Justice, an examining judge called for a full investigation into the 1982 murders, including the actions of 36 suspects.

#### b. Disappearance

There were no reports of politically motivated disappearances.

However, the new Government has yet to take any action to investigate allegations of some disappearances that occurred under previous regimes.

#### c. Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman, or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

The Constitution prohibits inhuman treatment or punishment, but human rights groups continue to express concern about official mistreatment and have documented cases of police mistreatment of detainees, particularly during arrests, and guard abuse of prisoners.

Prison conditions are poor. There are three state prisons and several detention facilities at police stations, where arrestees are detained until they appear before a judge for trial. Human rights activists are concerned about conditions in the prisons and especially about conditions in local detention facilities. They report that the jails are overcrowded, that guards mistreat prisoners, and that medical care and living conditions are inadequate. Police officers, who are not trained in prison work, serve as the jailers at local detention facilities, a situation that human rights groups assert contributes to the abuses.

Women's jail and prison facilities and conditions are, in general, better than the men's facilities and conditions. There is a wing of an adult prison for boys under age 18 who have committed serious crimes. Juvenile facilities for boys between the ages of 11 and 18 within the adult prison were adequate; educational and recreational facilities were provided.

In February 1999, the human rights group Moiwana '86 issued a report that accused prison officials at two of the federal prisons of using electrical shocks to discipline prisoners. The report further asserted that different ethnic groups receive different forms and degrees of punishments. Prison officials denied the accusations, and the Government took no investigative action. Moiwana '86 did not pursue the issue further.

The completion of a new prison and renovation of existing jails have reduced somewhat the problems and improved overall health and safety conditions. However, the older jails remain seriously overcrowded, with as many as four times the number of detainees for which they were designed. In addition these older prisons are unsanitary. At police stations, guards allow detainees no exercise and only rarely permit them to leave their cells. Detainees and human rights groups also complain about inadequate prison meals, although families are permitted and encouraged to provide food to incarcerated relatives. Local detention facilities remain overcrowded.

Since 1996 Moiwana '86 has monitored the condition of prisoners. Representatives of the group report that in general they have access to prisoners and receive cooperation from prison officials on routine matters. Moiwana '86 and the police cooperated to develop a detention officer training program for police guards working at the local detention facilities. The program consists of lectures given at the state prison to both guards and prisoners.

#### d. Arbitrary Arrest, Detention, or Exile

The law prohibits arbitrary arrest and detention, and the authorities generally respect these provisions in practice. However, delays have caused prisoners who appeal their sentences to remain in prison until a ruling is reached on their appeal, even if they have served the full term of their original sentence. Lawyers have filed complaints, but the problem has not been resolved.

The law provides that the police may detain for investigation for up to 14 days a person suspected of committing a crime for which the sentence is longer than 4 years. During the 14-day period, the law also permits incommunicado detention, which must be authorized by an assistant district attorney or a police inspector. Within the 14-day period, the police must bring the accused before a prosecutor to be charged formally. If additional time is needed to investigate the charge, a prosecutor may authorize the police to detain the suspect for an additional 30 days. Upon the expiration of the initial 44 days, a judge of instruction may authorize the police to hold the suspect for up to 120 additional days, in 30-day increments (for a total of 164 days), before the case is tried. The judge of instruction has the power to authorize release on bail, but that power is used rarely, if ever.

Pretrial detainees, who constitute a large percentage of inmates, routinely are held without being brought before a judge. They often are held in overcrowded detention cells at local police stations. Of those held in police custody or detention cells, a steadily growing number already had been convicted but not yet placed in prisons.

The military police continued to observe the requirement to hand over to the civil police civilians arrested for committing a crime in their presence. The military police continued to maintain responsibility for control of the country's borders and airports, but it no longer investigated civilian crimes.

The Constitution does not prohibit specifically forced exile; however, it is not practiced.

#### e. Denial of Fair Public Trial

Although the Constitution provides for an independent judiciary, an ongoing dispute between the previously sitting judges and a new slate appointed by the former Government severely damaged the concept of an independent judiciary. However, the change in government led to the resignations of the disputed judges. The new Government appointed an acting president of the Court of Justice and named the Solicitor General to act also as Attorney General. As a result of the conflict, the effectiveness of the civilian and military courts still was limited in practice, but at year's end, the judiciary appeared to be acting independently.

The judicial system consists of three lower courts and an appeals court, which is called the Court of Justice; there is no Supreme Court. In July 1998, President Wijdenbosch named a new President of the Court of Justice and Prosecutor General without consulting with, and over the objections of, the sitting justices. Most legal authorities interpret the Constitution to require that consultation, and the members of the court refused to recognize the named President of the court or Prosecutor General. In spite of the continued objections, President Wijdenbosch named additional justices without consultation in December 1998. In May 1999, the appointed President of the Court of Justice first swore in himself, and then he swore in the new justices. With the change in Government, the President of the Court and other disputed judges resigned. The 1987 Constitution calls for the establishment of an independent constitutional court. Although the previous Government did not take any steps to set up such a court, at year's end the Venetiaan Government was assembling a group of judges to sit on the court.

The Constitution provides for the right to a fair public trial in which defendants have the right to counsel if needed. The courts assign lawyers in private practice to defend indigent prisoners and pays lawyers from public funds. However, the court-assigned lawyers usually only appear at the trial, if they appear at all. The courts must, and in practice do, free a detainee who is not tried within the 164-day period. In one instance, a court levied a fine against the Government for failing to release detainees as directed by the court. Trials are before a single judge, with the right of appeal. Due to the conflict over the legitimacy of the president of the Court and the justices, there is a large backlog in the judicial system.

Military personnel generally are not subject to civilian criminal law. A soldier accused of a crime immediately comes under military jurisdiction, and military police are responsible for all such investigations. Military prosecutions are directed by an officer on the public prosecutor's staff and take place in separate courts before two military judges and one civilian judge. The military courts follow the same rules of procedure as the civil courts. There is no appeal from the military to the civil system.

There were no reports of political prisoners.

f. Arbitrary Interference with Privacy, Family, Home, or Correspondence

The Constitution provides for the right to privacy. The law requires warrants for searches, which are issued by quasi-judicial officers who supervise criminal investigations. The police obtain them in the great majority of investigations. There have been complaints of surveillance of human rights workers by members of the military police and the division of central intelligence. There is still a threat of forced resettlement of indigenous populations due to the granting of timber and gold concessions (see Section 5).

Section 2 Respect for Civil Liberties, Including:

a. Freedom of Speech and Press

The Constitution provides for freedom of speech and of the press, and the Government generally respects these rights; however, in practice there were reports of intimidation and harassment.

The parliamentary and extraparliamentary opposition criticize the Government freely. Some media members continue to practice some self-censorship because of the history of intimidation and reprisals by certain elements of the former military leadership.

The Wijdenbosch Government publicly reprimanded radio stations and newspapers for their negative coverage of protest demonstrations that took place in May 1999. Although the Government threatened to censor the press, it ultimately took no action, and there continued to be reports unfavorable to the Government.

In April one of the two daily newspapers, De West, was firebombed one night. At year's end, the incident remained under investigation.

On July 24, a group of Bouterse supporters harassed and attempted to beat a journalist outside the National Assembly. The journalist was known to be critical of Bouterse, and the attack took place the first day Bouterse occupied his new seat in the Assembly. The police intervened, but the Bouterse supporters threatened to find the journalist anywhere in the country.

The two daily newspapers, five television stations, and most of the radio stations are owned privately. Two television stations and two radio stations are owned publicly. Four companies provide cable television, which includes international channels. Two companies, one private and one public, offer unrestricted access to electronic media.

The Government respects academic freedom.

b. Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association

The Constitution provides for freedom of assembly, and the Government generally respects this right in practice. However, in response to a series of public demonstrations in May 1999, the Government announced that it intended to begin enforcing a 1930's law requiring a permit to hold a public demonstration or gathering. After the announcement, in late July 1999, the authorities detained two opposition leaders for demonstrating without a permit but quickly released them. Subsequent public marches were allowed to proceed without permits.

The Constitution provides for freedom of association, and the Government respects this right in practice.

c. Freedom of Religion

The Constitution provides for freedom of religion, and the Government respects this right in practice.

d. Freedom of Movement Within the Country, Foreign Travel, Emigration, and Repatriation

Citizens may change their residence and workplaces freely and may travel abroad as they wish. Political dissidents who emigrated to the Netherlands and elsewhere during the years of military rule are welcome to return. Few of them have chosen to do so, generally for economic reasons. Citizenship is not revoked for

political reasons.

Although it is possible for persons to be granted refugee status under special circumstances, there are no provisions in the law for granting asylum or refugee status in accordance with the standards of the 1951 U.N. Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol.

The Government cooperates with the office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and other humanitarian organizations in assisting refugees. The issue of the provision of first asylum did not arise. There were no reports of forced return of persons to a country where they feared persecution.

### Section 3 Respect for Political Rights: The Right of Citizens to Change Their Government

The Constitution provides for this right, but in the past the military prevented its effective exercise. Although the military twice has transferred power to elected civilian governments following coups, 2000 marked the second time since independence from the Netherlands in 1975 that one elected government succeeded another in accordance with constitutional provisions. The Government is still in the process of institutionalizing democratic, constitutional rule.

The Constitution stipulates that power and authority rest with the citizens and provides for the right to change the government through the direct election by secret ballot of a National Assembly of 51 members every 5 years. The National Assembly then elects the President by a two-thirds vote. If the legislature is unable to do so, as was the case both in the 1991 and 1996 national elections, the Constitution provides that a national people's assembly, composed of Members of Parliament and regional and local officials, shall elect the President.

The Constitution provides for the organization and functioning of political parties. Many parties and political coalitions are represented in the National Assembly. After the May elections, President Venetiaan formed a cabinet from members of the New Front coalition, comprised of the NPS, a predominantly Creole party; the Progressive Reform Party, a predominantly Hindustani party; the Suriname Labor Party, a political wing of the largest labor union; and Pertjaja Luhur, a predominantly Javanese party.

There are historical and cultural impediments to equal participation by women in leadership positions in government and political parties, and they are underrepresented in government and politics. In the past, most women were expected to fulfill the roles of housewife and mother, thereby limiting opportunities to gain political experience or position. Participation by women in politics (and other fields) generally was considered inappropriate. While women have made limited gains in attaining political power in recent years, political circles remain under the influence of traditional male-dominated groups, and women are disadvantaged in seeking high public office. In the May elections, voters elected nine women to the National Assembly, compared with six who held seats in the previous assembly, and the Assembly appointed a woman as vice chairperson. The Cabinet includes one woman as Minister of Foreign Affairs, another as Minister of Internal Affairs, and a third as Deputy Minister of Social Affairs.

Although the Constitution prohibits racial or religious discrimination, several factors limit the participation of Maroons (descendants of escaped slaves who fled to the interior to avoid recapture) and Amerindians in the political process. Most of the country's political activity takes place in the capital and a narrow belt running east and west of it along the coast. The Maroons and Amerindians are concentrated in remote areas in the interior and therefore have limited access to, and influence on, the political process. Voters elected the first Amerindians to the National Assembly in 1996. After the May elections, there are eight Maroons and one Amerindian in the National Assembly. There are no Maroons or Amerindians in the Cabinet.

### Section 4 Governmental Attitude Regarding International and Nongovernmental Investigation of Alleged Violations of Human Rights

Human rights groups operate without government restriction, investigating and publishing their findings on human rights cases; however, government officials generally are not cooperative or responsive to their views. There have been complaints of surveillance of human rights workers by members of the military police and the division of central intelligence.

### Section 5 Discrimination Based on Race, Sex, Religion, Disability, Language, or Social Status

The Constitution and laws, with the exception of ethnic marriage laws, do not differentiate among citizens on the basis of their ethnic origins, religious affiliations, or other cultural differences. However, in practice several groups within society suffer various forms of discrimination.

## Women

Violence against women is a problem. The law does not differentiate between domestic violence and other forms of assault. The Government has not addressed specifically the problem of violence against women. According to a national women's group, victims continue to report cases of violence against women and complain of an inadequate response from the Government and society to what appears to be a trend of increasing family violence. Although the police have been reluctant to intervene in instances of domestic violence, a national women's group noted that police attitudes have improved significantly as a result of training conducted in 1999.

There are no specific laws to protect women against trafficking and sexual exploitation. Prostitution is illegal; however, the police lack the resources to enforce these laws effectively. There were credible reports of trafficking in women for prostitution (see Section 6.f.).

Women have the right to equal access to education, employment, and property. Nevertheless, social pressures and customs, especially in rural areas, inhibit their full exercise of these rights, particularly in the areas of marriage and inheritance. Women experience economic discrimination in access to employment and in rates of pay for the same or substantially similar work. The Government has not made specific efforts to combat economic discrimination.

The National Women's Center is a government agency devoted to women's issues; there is also a women's policy coordinator. Their effectiveness is limited severely by financial and staffing constraints. The principal concerns of women's groups are political representation, economic vulnerability, violence, and discrimination.

## Children

School attendance is free and compulsory until 12 years of age, but some school-age children do not have access to education due to a lack of transportation, facilities, or teachers. There is no legal difference in the treatment of girls and boys in education or health care services, and in practice both are treated fairly equally. Both students and parents complained about the Government's decision to double enrollment fees for public school, which occurred both in 1999 and 2000. Children face increasing economic pressure to discontinue their education in order to work.

The Government allocates only limited resources to ensure safeguards for the human rights and welfare of children. There are continuing reports of malnutrition among poor children, but it is difficult to quantify the extent of the problem. In the capital, where most of the country's population is concentrated, there are several orphanages and one privately funded shelter for sexually abused children. Elsewhere, distressed children usually must rely on the resources of their extended families. There were credible reports of hospitals refusing to hand newborns over to their mothers until hospital bills were paid in full, sending them instead to a state facility. The Government denied that such refusals occurred and stated that there was no such policy; one human rights group continued its investigation into the matter.

There is no societal pattern of abuse directed against children; however, some children are exploited sexually, and there were credible reports of trafficking in girls for prostitution (see Section 6.f.). The legal age of sexual consent is 14; however, it is not enforced strictly, and the Asian Marriage Law lowers the marriage age for children of Asian descent to 12 years for girls and 15 years for boys. Otherwise, one must be 31 years old to marry without parental permission.

## People with Disabilities

There are no laws concerning disabled persons and no provisions for making private or public buildings accessible to them. There are also no laws mandating that they be given equal consideration when seeking jobs or housing. However, there are some training programs for the blind and others with disabilities. In practice disabled persons suffer from discrimination when applying for jobs and services.

## Indigenous People

The Constitution affords no special protection for, or recognition of, indigenous people. Most Amerindians and Maroons suffer a number of disadvantages and have only limited ability to participate in decisions affecting their lands, cultures, traditions, and natural resources. The country's political life, educational opportunities, and jobs are concentrated in the capital and its environs, while the majority of Amerindians and Maroons live in the interior. Government services in the interior became largely unavailable, and much of the infrastructure was destroyed during the 1986-91 domestic insurgencies; progress in reestablishing services and rebuilding

the infrastructure has been very slow.

The Government appointed the Consultative Council for the Development of the Interior in September 1995. This council, provided for in the 1992 peace accords that formally ended the insurgencies, includes representatives of the Maroon and Amerindian communities. However, the Government did not consult with representatives of these communities about the granting of gold and timber concessions on indigenous and tribal lands. Early in the year, the Wijdenbosch Government made an attempt to grant some land rights to indigenous people. Tribal leaders rejected the proposal, asserting that it was too weak. In November the new Government's Minister of Natural Resources met with tribal leaders and promised to work with tribal authorities toward a solution regarding land grants.

Organizations representing Maroon and Amerindian communities complain that small-scale mining operations, mainly illegal Brazilian gold miners, dig trenches that cut residents off from their agricultural land and threaten to drive them away from their traditional settlements. Mercury runoff from these operations also contaminates and threatens traditional food source areas.

Maroon and Amerindian groups continued to cooperate with each other in order to exercise their rights more effectively. Two summits, or "gran krutus," bringing together Maroon and Amerindian tribal leaders, have been held, the most recent in September 1996. During these summits, indigenous leaders reiterated their demands for the right to participate in decisions concerning the use of natural resources on land they claim as their own and for greater autonomy from the Government.

## Section 6 Worker Rights

### a. The Right of Association

The Constitution protects the right of workers to associate and to choose their representatives democratically. Nearly 60 percent of the work force is organized into unions, and most unions belong to one of the country's six major labor federations. Unions are independent of the Government but play an active role in politics. The small Labor Party historically has been a very influential force in government.

The Constitution provides for the right to strike. Civil servants have the right to strike, and strikes in both the public and private sectors are common as workers try to secure wage gains to protect their earning power from inflation.

There are no restrictions on unions' international activities.

### b. The Right to Organize and Bargain Collectively

The Constitution explicitly recognizes these rights, and the authorities respect them in practice. Collective bargaining agreements cover approximately 50 percent of the labor force. Bauxite industry workers are organized, but gold miners are not. The law prohibits antiunion discrimination by employers, and there are effective mechanisms for resolving complaints of such discrimination. Employers must have prior permission from the Ministry of Labor to fire workers, except when discharging an employee for cause. The Labor Ministry individually reviews dismissals for cause; if it finds a discharge unjustified, the employee must be reinstated.

There are no export processing zones.

### c. Prohibition of Forced or Compulsory Labor

The Constitution prohibits forced or compulsory labor, and it generally is not known to occur. However, there were credible reports of trafficking in women and girls for prostitution (see Section 6.f.). The law prohibits forced and bonded labor by children, and such practices generally are not known to occur.

### d. Status of Child Labor Practices and Minimum Age for Employment

The law sets the minimum age for employment at 14 years; however, the Ministry of Labor and the police enforce this law only sporadically. Children under 14 years of age work as street vendors, newspaper sellers, or shop assistants. Working hours for youths are not limited in comparison with the regular work force. School attendance is compulsory until 12 years of age. The law prohibits forced and bonded labor by children, and there were no reports of such practices, although trafficking of girls for prostitution does occur (see Sections

6.c. and 6.f.).

e. Acceptable Conditions of Work

There is no minimum wage legislation. In October 1999, civil servants were granted a tax-free 60 percent pay increase for those with the lowest wages, a 55 percent increase for middle wage earners, and a 50 percent increase for the highest wage earners. Including that pay increase and a cost of living allowance of about \$12 (Sfl 30,000), the lowest wage for civil servants is about \$40 (Sfl 102,000) per month. This salary level makes it very difficult to provide a decent standard of living for a worker and family. Government employees, who constitute approximately 50 percent of the work force of 100,000, frequently supplement their salaries with second or third jobs, often in the informal sector. The President and Council of Ministers set and approve civil service wage increases. Civil service and other wages are not keeping pace with inflation.

Work in excess of 9 hours per day or 45 hours per week on a regular basis requires special government permission, which is granted routinely. Such overtime work earns premium pay. The law requires one 24-hour rest period per week.

A 10- to 12-member inspectorate in the Occupational Health and Safety Division of the Ministry of Labor is responsible for enforcing legislated occupational safety and health regulations. Resource constraints and lack of trained personnel preclude the division from making regular inspections of industry. Accident rates in local industry do not appear to be high, and the key bauxite industry has an outstanding safety record. However, there is no law authorizing workers to refuse to work in circumstances they deem unsafe. They must appeal to the inspectorate to declare the workplace situation unsafe.

f. Trafficking in Persons

The only laws that specifically prohibit trafficking in persons are old "white slavery laws" that are enforced only rarely.

There were credible reports of trafficking in women and girls for prostitution. Women and girls from the interior are brought to the capital city and also to various gold mining locations in the interior. Several clubs in the capital also are known for recruiting women from Brazil and the Caribbean. There were credible reports of individuals using the country as a transit point to transport Brazilian women to Europe and the United States for purposes of prostitution.

In addition alien smuggling organizations use the country as an intermediate destination to smuggle Chinese nationals, including women and girls, to the United States, where frequently they are forced into bonded-labor situations.

[End.]